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ABSTRACT

Students' writing can benefit not only from pedagogical strategies but also from imagistic thinking. Writing instructors should use images and metaphors to help students heighten their perception of themselves as organizers, to assist them in getting from one place to another within their material, and to offer analogies for the shape of the texts which emerge. In addition, it is important to encourage students to freely cut and paste ideas, to restructure sentences rather than to stay bound to an original thought or form. Instructors should give students a guided, hands-on tour of the rhetorical kitchen, demonstrating the value of some standard forms, and allowing time for practice with them. If students are taught that they are already strategists in everyday life, they can learn to create their own analogies for catching readers' attention, for linking ideas, for reaching rhetorical destinations. (Sixteen references are attached.) (PRA)

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SOUP SANDWICHES AND BOX CARS: USING IMAGES TO TEACH ORGANIZATION

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My husband's favorite way of casting aspersions on an inefficient operation or an incoherent piece of writing is to characterize it as "organized like a soup sandwich." I like that phrase because it offers such a graphic image of chaos--something even more disorganized than the Professor's desk in the cartoon strip "Shoe."

But if soup sandwiches are bewildering because they have no boundaries, the opposite extreme--total, rigid organization--is boring because its boundaries are so predictable. Donald Stewart visualizes the rigidly organized essay as a string of boxcars--and even a train enthusiast can get hypnotized by watching too many boxcars trundle past at a crossing. Thus, as often happens, extremes find a meeting place: bewilderment and boredom leave us equally uninterested.

What I'm visualizing as soup-sandwich thinking and boxcar thinking are labeled by Judith Kirscht and Emily Golson, in a Journal of Advanced Composition article, as chaotic thinking and empty thinking respectively. Kirscht and Golson recommend that we counter each with a proper antidote: teaching "chaotic" writers to master a few formulas, and guiding "empty" writers to explore the realm of organic form.

That's valuable advice. But what about all the possibilities in the middle? I want to argue that the whole middle range can benefit not only from pedagogical strategies but also from imagistic thinking. To anchor that thinking, I want to focus on

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Kenneth Burke's definition of form: in Counterstatement, Burke speaks of form as the "arousing and fuflfillment of desires," with "one part of [a work] . . . lead[ing] a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence" (Larson 40, quoting from W. Ross Winterowd's Contemporary Rhetoric 183).

If we speak to our students about "arousing and fulfillment of desires," I suspect that most of them will think first of sexual desire. (Isn't that true of us as well?) That's fine, because the association embodies, if I may put it that way, the point I want to make: that images play a vital role in our learning processes. They may not work for everybody, and they probably don't work in isolation, but images do make precepts vivid, they make abstractions concrete; and as a result, they make ideas memorable.

I've already played with two images of disorganization, drawn from rich sources of rhetorical metaphor--cooking and travelling. Both of these types of images remind us, as my husband pointed out to me recently, that the entire notion of organization is a matter of transition, of getting from one place to another. What effective writers do is to create openings so powerful that they entice readers to venture from their mental homes into the writers' worlds; coax readers to stay along for the ride from one vantage point to the next; and finally, send readers, changed and "gratified," back home, carrying with them some magical souvenir of their adventure with the writer.

But there's one more image I want to play with, because it adds a salutary complication to our thinking. In both cooking

and travelling, we end up somewhere other than where we began. But another metaphor, uniting order and fluidity, is often used for organization. That's the image of the dance--"the complete consort dancing together," as Eliot says in Four Quartets. Dancing doesn't get us anywhere, but the movement with a good partner is itself gratifying.

So how do we teach our students to become expert dancers, chefs, and travel guides? Not by merely loading them with advice; the advice itself has to be translated into images. Otherwise, students are stuck in the position of the cartoon character Cathy, who's having trouble interpreting a recipe because she's never made the dish before (and just because she's Cathy). So, as she yells in one of her phone calls to Mom, "Does 'Add a can of tomatoes' mean just the tomatoes or the tomatoes and the juice? How do I cook potatoes at 400 if the main course is cooking at 325? How am I supposed to 'salt and pepper to taste' if it's not cooked yet and even if it were, I don't know what it's supposed to taste like?"

We may not get many phone calls from students as panicky as Cathy, and we may not experience the smug satisfaction of her mother, who gloats over her daughter's preparing a fifteen-phone-call dinner. But we do have the responsibility--and the eventual satisfaction--of guiding our students as they design verbal meals which are more fulfilling than soup sandwiches.

There are many kinds of help we can offer our students, those apprentice chefs and tour guides. We can help them heighten their image of themselves as organizers; we can assist them in getting from one place to another within their material; and we

can offer analogies for the shape of the texts which emerge. Here I want to concentrate just on writers as organizers and on the shaping processes they use. There's no clear boundary between these two topics; we'll be dancing back and forth between them throughout these reflections.

Let's begin with the writer as organizer--the person responsible for the arousing and fulfillment of (rhetorical) desires. We're all painfully familiar with the writer who seems not to think of herself as an organizer--the kind who says, as one of my students did after completing an essay, "I put my information in this order because 'that's the way it came out in my mind.'"

Admittedly, "the way it came out in my mind" is sometimes the fruit of considerable planning--or of glorious inspiration. But all too often, writers just don't know how to start getting any arrangement to "come out in their minds."

Speaking compassionately of such desperate souls, teacher Sue Newton describes the writer without a plan: being a "poor writer without an end in sight," says Newton, "is like being invited for a walk in the Sahara desert, without a direction, without knowing for how long, and without a map" (39). As a remedy, Newton offers what she calls a "star chart," a sort of nonlinear outline--a diagram with a topic in the center and subtopics radiating out; as Newton says, this device graphically shows writers what they know, how their knowledge can be divided, and what they still have to cover.

Not every writer needs or wants a visual device for planning, but all writers need to regard themselves as planners--

people who possess a range of strategies for creating movement. I think of one of my Advanced Composition students, David Lopez, who wrote a journal entry a couple of years ago about a completed piece. "I wrote three drafts of the essay," David said, "before I finally became focused on my purpose. That is, I found my ending; without it the entire work would take the reader on a never-ending ride."

David's insight points out that thinking about the writer as organizer is inseparable from thinking about the process of organizing--a process which at some point includes considering one's audience and purpose. It may not help all writers, though, to consider the entire rhetorical triangle at once; just shaping the material, finding a trail through it, as Donald Murray says in Write to Learn (99), may be enough to start with.

Finding a trail is often a matter of making a trail--allowing oneself to play with the material until some shaping insight arises. On this point, I keep thinking back to one of Jim Corder's essays in Freshman English News, where he talks about trying to prove that there's no such thing as a dull topic. In his quest, he let his students assign him the most boring topic they could think of. Somehow they settled on having him write about Cheerios, and before the next class, Corder duly fulfilled his assignment. Later, in writing about the resulting essay, Corder notes that he allowed himself some leeway: he created a form and focus by doing some mental wriggling, which he refers to as "vamping and ooching." He admits that students may assume they have no permission to "vamp and ooch," but he recommends it as a way of establishing a direction.

So how do we help students regard themselves as vampers and oochers? How do we work with them in their effort to discover or to appropriate forms that evoke the desires which they hope to fulfill? Now, I'm assuming that we've already guided them through an array of techniques for generating ideas--we've helped them assemble what I like to call an extensive wardrobe of material to work with. For some writers, as Mark Knapp and James McCroskey suggest, invention and arrangement are truly "Siamese twins," and the very act of accumulating the wardrobe has already led to the choice of appropriate pieces, all coordinated into an outfit suitable for the occasion. However, for others, the arrangement process turns out to be just shuffling the same old outfits from one hanger to another. They end up like Ed Stein's cartoon version of Presidents Bush and Gorbachev, trying to assemble the puzzle of the "new world order" and sighing, "This would be easier if we had a picture." So, for ways of assisting these students who don't have a guiding picture, let's shift for a moment to a puzzle of our own.

The puzzle I have in mind is from Edward De Bono's Lateral Thinking. De Bono asks people to arrange two pieces of plastic into "a shape that would be easy to describe" (31). It's easy enough to whirl the two pieces around and create a square; there's still no major problem when a third piece is added; and even when a fourth and fifth piece are presented, the puzzle is easy to solve. But when a sixth piece arrives, most of us fail because we try to work this new problem the same way we did the first set.

To solve the newest problem, as De Bono notes, we must "go back and rearrange the pieces at some stage . . . ." His point is that we have to stop being constrained by the order in which we originally received the information (the way it first "came out in [our] mind[s]." Thus, as De Bono insists, "even though one had been correct at each stage one would still have to re-structure the situation before being able to proceed" (31-35).

Puzzles like that, I think, create a lasting mental image of the need for restructuring. Still, students may say, "Okay, I see the point, but I don't know how to apply it to my writing." So we start with a manageable verbal structure, the sentence. I find it's helpful to play with an activity recommended by Richard Eastman in his book Style: Writing and Reading as the Discovery of Outlook. Eastman presents an exercise involving sentences with two or three italicized elements, and tells readers to restructure the original sentence by using first one then another element as openers. His sample sentence reads, "Although Mark's grades were very good, he found it hard to settle down in law school." Eastman's two rephrasings go as follows:

> (1) In spite of very good grades, Mark found it hard to settle down in law school.
>
> (2) Settling down in law school was hard for Mark, in spite of his good grades. (194)

Even in short sentences, different openings create different expectations. Thus we note a microcosmic application of Burke's concept: altering the opening reshapes the desire--it creates a new path. As Murray says, "When you choose a lead there are things you have to do and things you can no longer do" (99).

It's not such a big step from this movement within sentences to playing with different "openers" for paragraphs and entire essays. Maybe the easiest way to work with these larger structures is the good old scissors and tape method: give students an essay cut into paragraphs and have them assemble it. I've had even Advanced Composition students enjoy this activity: there's something liberating about this reversion to primary school, especially if it's done sitting on the floor. It's more fun than moving blocks of text on a word processor.

Playing with openings, playing with scissors and tape, is just that--playing. But it's not mere fooling around; it's not a concession to average students. On the contrary, activities like these allow for "vamping and ooching": they let students try out alternatives without fear of being committed irrevocably to any one of them. To experience oneself as a playful arranger, a designer, creates a mental space in which to work comfortably.

That doesn't mean being thrown into the vast kitchen of ideas and told to wander around and intuitively devise a few recipes for gourmet dishes. Total freedom like that is wonderful only for people with great imagination, self-confidence, and/or experience--people who know what the entree is supposed to taste like. Others are likely to drift back to whatever patterns they've been taught or have stumbled onto--patterns that may or may not fit the ideas being expressed. As Gabriele Rico says in Writing the Natural Way, writers need a strategy for discovering "the larger picture; without it writing becomes a painful process of laboriously squeezing out sentence after sentence like too-

stiff dough out of a cookie press, producing a final product that is likely to be crumbly instead of cohesive" (109-10).

So we do need to give students a guided, hands-on tour of the rhetorical kitchen, demonstrating the value of some standard forms and allowing time for practice with them. Sheridan Baker's classic text, The Practical Stylist, comes to mind here, with his diagrams of ways to proceed from general to specific or vice versa. Or, more recently, a Rhetoric Review article by William Zeiger offers a fine tour of the essay as a "circular journey." Using examples from Charles Lamb's "The Old China" and Alice Walker's essay "Beauty: Where the Other Dancer Is the Self," Zeiger describes the "circular path" as "a movement outward and back, drawing separate elements towards a common center" (210).

Still, even after we've walked students through a variety of funnels and circles, supervised their cooking, their travelling, their dancing, they ultimately have to try it all out on their own. They have to devise their own plans for their independent ventures. To assure them that they're already capable vampers and oochers, we might return to the notion of writers as organizers.

Those writers are the same selves who do many other things, who have lives outside our classroom (though they often accuse us of forgetting this). They are people who already know, at least tacitly, many ways of devising moves to create the kinds of movement they desire. Are they good at working out football plays? at rescuing princesses in Nintendo games? at getting a date for Saturday night? Once they recognize that they are already strategists in everyday life, students can create their

own analogies for catching readers' attention, for linking ideas, for reaching rhetorical destinations.

One of my favorite examples from everyday life originated with a Korean student of mine who was learning English. Mr. Kim wrote that a thesis sentence is like a kernel of popcorn: it's very small and hard, but when it pops, it grows into something enjoyable and nourishing.

Metaphors, then, do lie buried within the most everyday experiences. Helping writers find the images that work for them is itself a major transition--a movement from the ideas of writers and teachers "out there" to the writer within.

And when our strategists return to the classroom with their papers, I hope we'll also encourage them to see where their texts already exhibit skillful shaping. Our feedback and our directions for peer feedback should help students recognize how they're structuring their work and where that structure is already successful. By praising their success, we strengthen their transition into the world of confident, competent writers.

Thus, whatever our students call their shaping processes--games, journeys, banquets--the activity of savoring and creating images helps them reflect on what they're doing. A picture <u>is</u> worth a thousand words; it may also generate a thousand words--AND a way of getting those words to hang together, arousing and fulfilling desire.

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